

Abraham Lincoln's Contemporaries

Joshua Speed

Excerpts from newspapers and other
sources

From the files of the
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection

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Joshua
F. Speed
and
His Wife.



NYT, 1922

The Enquirer
Cincinnati, Ohio
September 8, 1963



A SPOT IN KENTUCKY

Farmington, built by Judge John Speed in 1810, stands at the end of a lane off the Bardstown Road south of Louisville. The Jeffersonian house, with its authentic furnishings, contains relics from its earliest days, when a small fort stood near by, to the more settled day when Lincoln spent several weeks visiting his friend Joshua Speed.—Sketch by Caroline Williams



Lincoln Lore

Bulletin of the Louis A. Warren Lincoln Library and Museum. Mark E. Neely, Jr., Editor.
Mary Jane Hubler, Editorial Assistant. Published each month by the
Lincoln National Life Insurance Company, Fort Wayne, Indiana 46801.

January, 1979

Number 1691

JAMES SPEED, A PERSONALITY INDEED

James Speed, Lincoln's second Attorney General and the brother of his good friend Joshua, is one of the more shadowy figures in Lincoln's official family. Historians often write his appointment to the cabinet off as cronyism, his tenure in office was brief, and no biographer has ever taken up Speed's cause. His grandson, also named James Speed, did publish a volume entitled *James Speed: A Personality* (Louisville: Press of John P. Morton, 1914), which stitched together excerpts from his grandfather's correspondence, but it is adequate only to whet the appetite. Speed was an independent and intelligent man, more astute politically and closer to Lincoln's Republican principles than his brother Joshua. Joshua was a gentleman farmer and a real estate broker; James was a lawyer and a politician, though for most of his life a politician without a constituency.

As early as 1859, when James Speed, like most Southerners, had been driven into the Democratic party for want of any other place to go, he was independent and shrewd enough to realize that Abraham Lincoln posed no real threat to Southern constitutional rights. Lincoln had engaged in a wrangle with Joshua over Republican policies and "Bleeding Kansas" in 1855, but James could write Lincoln four years later and say, "that tho a democrat, I would not have sorrowed at your election to the U.S. Senate — I feel that our rights and institutions would not have been in jeopardy in your hands." By contrast, Joshua, even when he congratulated Lincoln on his nomination for the Presidency in 1860, reminded him that he was "a warm personal friend" but "a political opponent."

James Speed had served one term in the Kentucky Legislature over a decade before the Civil War, but he became so identified with opposition to slavery that he never had a Kentucky constituency again until the war. When he wrote Lincoln in 1859, it was to send him a pamphlet by Louisville's Judge S.S. Nicholas which embodied a bizarre proposal to eliminate the role of political parties in selecting the President. The plan would have

given each state one Presidential elector per million of population. These electors, once chosen, would be divided into six classes and each class would nominate a person. Of these six, two names would be drawn by lot, and the electors would choose which of the two would be President. The other would be Vice-President.

When war broke out, James and Joshua became leaders of pro-Union sentiment and activity in Kentucky. James gained election to the Kentucky Senate. Though he mildly protested General John C. Frémont's emancipation proclamation in Missouri in 1861, James Speed soon introduced a measure in the Kentucky Legislature for confiscation of the estates of rebels. The bill was doomed in part because James introduced

it. "I am regarded as ultra," he told Lincoln, "almost an abolitionist, and of course any thing from me on the subject of slavery is regarded with suspicion." When his bill did not provide for the state to sell confiscated slaves with the rest of confiscated property, legislators asked why. The "state never should sell a human being by my vote," Speed explained. This remark produced "much excitement." "This I have told you," Speed wrote Lincoln, "that you may form some idea of how sensitive our people are upon this subject." Then, characteristically, Speed drew back, telling Lincoln, "You must not infer from what I have said that the pro-slavery feeling in this state is all controlling." There was "a growing hatred of the southern traitors in Kentucky," and this hatred "must soon embrace the institutions" of the Southern traitors.

Joshua Speed was so agitated by Frémont's proclamation that he was "unable to eat or sleep." Though he "and a few others" would be left alone to fight for the Union, the proclamation would essentially "crush out every vestige of a union party in the state." He reminded Lincoln that all "who live in Slave states," whether Unionist or not in sentiment, "have great fear of insurrection." To allow "negroes to be emancipated & remain among us" would have the same ef-



From the Louis A. Warren
Lincoln Library and Museum

FIGURE 1. James Speed.

fect, he warned, as attacking the freedom of worship or the right to teach children to read in the North. James Speed's protest against the proclamation was much less hysterical and his feelings about slavery more philosophical than Joshua's. By December of 1861, when he wrote Lincoln about his confiscation bill in the Kentucky Senate, James knew that the war was the beginning of the end of slavery. The "great laws of economy" would dictate its abolition by the masters themselves. "The emancipation feeling in Ky," he told Lincoln, "rises & falls with the rise & fall in the price of slaves." The war would "affect, if not destroy their value."

Though not a popular or especially successful politician, James Speed had a good deal of political savvy. Commenting on Simon Cameron's controversial proposal to arm the slaves as soldiers for the Union, Speed noted that Cameron "exhibited the common weakness of talking in advance of action." "Many who condemn what he said," Speed told Lincoln, "would approve the conduct he invites when the case [?] arises for it."

When Lincoln proposed bold antislavery action of his own, Speed was hesitant to recognize the wisdom of his own political knowledge. Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation would be a bold stroke, and it would come without elaborate previous discussion. Lincoln apparently read his proposed proclamation to James in July of 1862, at about the same time that his cabinet (and no one else) learned of it. Speed "pondered over the proclamation," but he decided "that it will do no good; most probably much harm." Still trusting the slow workings of economic laws, the Kentuckian argued that the "negro can not be emancipated by proclamation." If the Negro were no party to his own liberation, "he would sink into slavery again" as soon as the external liberating force were removed. In a statement strangely at odds with Joshua's fear of servile insurrection, James said, "If he has not the spirit to strike for freedom, he has not the pride of character to make him keep it when given to him." A sweeping proclamation "would but delude the poor negro, and shock most violently the prejudices of many in the north & nearly all in the south."

Once again, however, James Speed showed his detached view of Southern racial mores. He admitted to Lincoln that "the loyal men of Ky will not be moved by anything that may be done with the negro." Loyalty would thus survive such a proclamation. He concluded with a remark which, though not encouraging Lincoln to issue the proclamation, seemed almost an invitation to servile insurrection: "If the negro is to be free he must strike for it himself." Once Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, Speed quickly adjusted to it and noted the adjustment of other Kentuckians. "The negro-phobia is nothing like as bad as it was at first," he told Joshua on January 19, 1863. Time was "working wonders."

James Speed's appointment to Lincoln's cabinet late in 1864 was probably more than cronyism on Lincoln's part. Lincoln had discussed slavery with the Kentuckian on several occasions. He knew James Speed's flexibility, philosophical detachment, and independence of judgment. He probably even recognized evidence of greater statesmanship in James than in his old friend Joshua. After Lincoln's death, James quickly became identified with radical Republicanism, and most historians have shown surprise at this turn in the political feelings of a Kentuckian. Lincoln might not have been surprised himself. He knew of James Speed's independence and of his unemotional view of the South's peculiar institution. Even before Lincoln's assassination, James Speed knew very well what would be the sentiments that would govern reconstruction of the South. He told his mother on March 28, 1865, that "many difficulties remain to be settled, and unless the people of the South act wisely and act promptly, great suffering is still in store for them. If they will frankly and fully acknowledge the freedom of the black man and give to him the chance for improvement and elevation, their burden will be greatly lessened." When Abraham Lincoln selected him for his cabinet, he must have known that James Speed was a personality indeed.

LINCOLN AUTOGRAPHED *DEBATES*: ABRAHAM JONAS COPY

This, the fifth article in a series on presentation copies of the *Political Debates Between Hon. Abraham Lincoln and Hon. Stephen A. Douglas in the Celebrated Campaign of 1858*, in

Illinois, focuses on one of the best-known copies, the one given to Abraham Jonas. The Illinois State Historical Library in Springfield has owned the book, their only presentation copy of the *Debates*, for many years. Frederick Wells of Minneapolis, the grandson of Jonas, gave the book to that library.

That Lincoln gave Abraham Jonas a copy of his book is a great symbol of the wide range of Lincoln's associations. Jonas was an English Jew. After thirteen years' residence in Kentucky, he moved to Quincy, Illinois, in 1838; there he practiced law and continued his activities as a Mason and a Whig. Doubtless party activities and a mutual friendship with Orville Hickman Browning brought Lincoln and Jonas together at an earlier date, but the first documentary proof of their association is Jonas's letter to Lincoln inviting him to speak in Quincy. Stephen Douglas was coming to help the local candidate in what Jonas figured would be "the warmest contest for Congress that we have ever had in the district." The "Douglasites," Jonas said, "would as soon see old Nick here as yourself." Jonas's first loyalties were to Browning and another local Whig, but he supported Lincoln for the Senate in 1855. When Jonas again requested of Lincoln "one of your *sledge hammer speeches*" in 1858, Lincoln obliged, speaking in Augusta, Illinois, just two days before the famous Freeport debate with Douglas.

Jonas's considerable political abilities (he served as a state representative in both Kentucky and Illinois) were a function of his own speaking abilities. He does not appear to be a great party tactician in his correspondence with Lincoln. In fact, in 1860 he nearly lured Lincoln, unwittingly, into a political trap. On July 20, 1860, he told Lincoln that a Quincy Democratic leader was obtaining affidavits from Irishmen "that they saw you in Quincy come out of a Know Nothing Lodge." Lincoln replied, explaining that he had never been in such a lodge. Lincoln suggested relying on affidavits from local men of prominence to disprove the charge and added "a word of caution": "Our adversaries think they can gain a point, if they could force me to openly deny this charge, by which some degree of offence would be given to the Americans [i.e., Know Nothings]. For this reason, it must not publicly appear that I am paying any attention to the charge."

An interesting aspect of the same exchange of letters is the handling of the delicate question of ethnic prejudice in them. Jonas's letter to Lincoln stated, "I do not know if there is truth in the matter, neither do I care, but thought it best you should know about it." An Englishman by birth and a Jew, Jonas made it clear that his support of Lincoln did not hinge on knowledge that the Railsplitter had never participated in the nativist Know-Nothing movement. Lincoln's reply made it equally clear that he had no qualms about associating with former nativists: "I suppose as good, or even better, men than I may have been in American, or Know-Nothing lodges; but in point of fact, I never was in one, at Quincy, or elsewhere."

When Lincoln was President-elect, Jonas wrote him one of those alarming letters about the possibility of assassination. Jonas had "a very large family connection in the South," including six children in New Orleans. From one of his Southern relations, he had learned of a "perfect organization" of "desperate characters" to prevent Lincoln's inauguration, even "by using violence on the person of Lincoln." He recommended that free-state governors and Lincoln's friends take precautions because "no protection can be expected from the damned old traitor at the head of the Government [James Buchanan] or his subordinates." If Lincoln replied to this letter, it has not been found.

Jonas's Southern connections made his family one of those divided by the Civil War. Four of his sons fought for the Confederacy. When he was on his deathbed in 1864, Browning influenced Lincoln to allow one of Jonas's sons, then a prisoner in Union hands, to be released temporarily to pay a last visit to his father. Lincoln had been solicitous of Jonas's desires all along, appointing him — again because of a suggestion from Browning — postmaster in Quincy. When Jonas died, Lincoln made his widow postmistress there.

The Abraham Jonas copy of the *Debates* is an important relic of this interesting friendship. Lincoln students owe Jonas a debt for another reason. When Lincoln replied to Jonas's letter requesting a copy of the book, he stated that the publisher had not yet printed them but that Jonas would receive one of the one hundred copies the publisher promised Lincoln personally. This letter is our way of knowing that Lincoln had a hundred copies to give away.

Editor's Note: The Jonas letters to Lincoln are in the

When Today's Agenda Is a Prism for the Past

By DAVID W. DUNLAP

NEWLY arrived in town, the lanky 28-year-old lawyer did not have money to buy bedding from the 23-year-old merchant. So the merchant made an offer: "I have a large room with double bed upstairs, which you are very welcome to share with me," he said. The lawyer beamed with pleasure as he accepted the kindness.

For the next 3½ years, the two men shared the bed. The town was Springfield, Ill. The lawyer was Abraham Lincoln. The story was told by the merchant, Joshua Fry Speed, two years before his death in 1882.

A century and a half later, that seemingly ambiguous relationship has been invoked to suggest that the Republican Party, which is often uncomfortable with accepting homosexuality, is failing to acknowledge its own past. Although the party is dominated by social conservatives who reject the notion that homosexuals should be sheltered by special civil rights laws, it is also home to people who are just as fiscally conservative but happen to be gay, many openly so.

Intimations about Lincoln's sexuality were raised anew last month after Senator Bob Dole's Presidential campaign rejected a contribution from the Log Cabin Republicans, a gay group whose name was inspired by the humble beginnings (but not the youthful sleeping habits) of the party's first President. W. Scott Thompson, a prominent member of the Log Cabin Republicans, a Reagan appointee to the board of the United States Institute of Peace, and a professor at Tufts University's Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, retorted that homosexuals ought to feel welcome in the party, "given that the founder was gay."

Very Personal

Mr. Thompson's rejoinder reflects a phenomenon that is not unique to this era but seems to have gained greater currency: the re-examination of historical figures to discern personal traits that may be cited for political ends or self-validation. Many blacks embrace as their own the civilization of ancient Egypt, just as some Jews find comfort in theories that Columbus was Jewish. In recent years, journalists and historians have

looked anew at icons like Eleanor Roosevelt and Baron Frederick William Augustus von Steuben and discovered evidence suggesting they might have been gay.

"Almost every stigmatized group has sought to elevate its reputation by pointing to illustrious members," said George Chauncey, an associate professor of history at the University of Chicago.

Similarly, Mr. Thompson's remark, and an essay he has written — titled "Was Abe Lincoln Gay, Too? A Divided Man to Heal a Divided Age" — may have less to do with the past than with the present. Such inquiries have dismayed scholars who fear that history is not being plumbed but manipulated.

"I don't see how the whole question of Lincoln's

gayness would explain anything other than making gay people feel better," said Michael Burlingame, professor of history at Connecticut College and author of "The Inner World of Abraham Lincoln" (1994). "And I don't think the function of history is to make people feel good. Celebratory history is propaganda."

But Charles B. Strozier, a psychoanalyst, history professor at John Jay College of the City University of New York and author of "Lincoln's Quest for Union" (1982), said: "The questions we ask of the past emerge from contemporary concerns. That doesn't mean it's false history. It means we're directed to areas we care about. People have concerns now about the nature of family life, of sexual identities; in general, what's the relationship between public and private life."

Even if conclusive evidence were found that Lincoln had been in a homosexual relationship, would it matter? And to whom? The issue might be dismissed as pointless, since it seemed to have no effect on Lincoln's public persona or political agenda.

Historians hesitate to speculate whether sublimated sexual impulses, even if proven, might have engendered empathy for other repressed and oppressed people. "You would look again at Lincoln the merciful, at Lincoln the tender-hearted pardoner," said Harold Holzer, author of "The Lincoln Family Album" (1993). "But I don't think we can ever find an answer."

"That he could marry and have a deep, psychologically and physically intimate friendship with Joshua Speed shows that he was operating in an emotional universe very different from our own," Mr. Chauncey said.

Talking Marriage

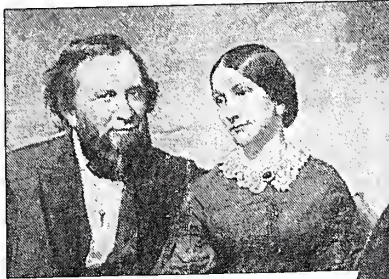
What is known is that Lincoln and Speed shared quarters from 1837 to 1841, when Speed moved home to Kentucky. As Speed grew apprehensive about his impending marriage to Fanny Henning in 1842, Lincoln wrote extraordinarily tender letters to him. Later that year, Lincoln married Mary Ann Todd.

While it was not unusual for two men to share a bed at that time, there has long been a hint of something more. In "Abraham Lincoln: The Prairie Years" (1926), Carl Sandburg, without being more specific, repeatedly described the two as having "a streak of lavender and spots soft as May violets."

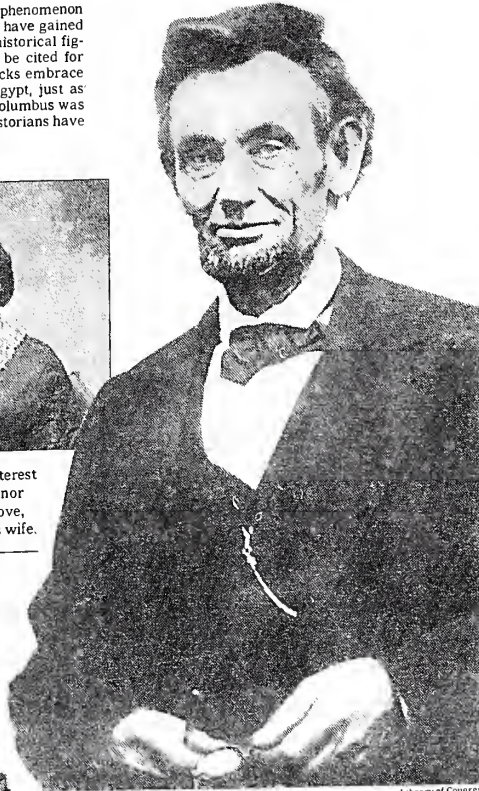
That phrase — though only vaguely suggesting a "streak" — would have been understood in the 1920's as a reference to homosexuality, Mr. Chauncey said. But Herbert Mitgang, the editor of "The Letters of Carl Sandburg" and author of the play "Mister Lincoln," said the language proved "nothing except Sandburg's poetic reach."

Martin Duberman, executive director of the Center for Lesbian and Gay Studies at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, is leading a discussion on biography at a two-day conference, "Lesbian and Gay History: Defining a Field," beginning Friday at the Graduate Center in Manhattan.

He cautioned that it was "irresponsible to quickly label someone from the past 'gay' or 'lesbian' unless we have very concrete evidence of genital activity and probably a romantic connection — and we almost never have that."



Gay and lesbian groups have taken interest in the sex lives of, among others, Eleanor Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln. Above, Lincoln's friend Joshua Speed and his wife.



Library of Congress



The New York Times

NYT 10-1-95



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FARMINGTON

Designed after a plan by Thomas Jefferson.



PURE
KENTUCKY

FARMINGTON

Designed after a plan by Thomas Jefferson.



History — No house more gracefully embodies Federal architecture than Farmington, built in 1810 by John and Lucy Fry Speed. It was set on a large tract of the celebrated "Beargrass" land near Louisville, now a 18 acre property. Here in 1841 the young Abraham Lincoln visited his close friend, Joshua Speed (son of Judge John Speed). A copy of his touchingly human "bread and butter" letter is on display.

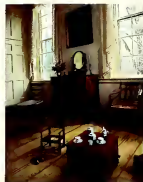
Major Features — Striking Jeffersonian features of this perfectly proportioned fourteen-room house are the two central octagonal rooms, each flanked by square rooms and separated by a wide hallway. A favorite detail is the hidden stairway adventurously steep and narrow. Exquisite reeded doorways and meticulously carved mantels and moldings add their special elegance to the interior. On the grounds are an elaborate early 19th century garden, a working blacksmith shop, and a handsome reconstructed stone and timber barn.

Chronology — After the widowed Lucy Speed sold it in 1865, Farmington had two long-time owners who operated the farm until the 1940s, when it changed hands twice. The last owners, appreciating its beauty and historical importance, began repairs and added conveniences that put the house in excellent condition. In late 1956 a group to SAVE FARMINGTON arose, the forerunner of HISTORIC HOMES FOUNDATION, INC., who purchased the home in 1958. In 1976 an extensive refurbishing of the exterior returned Farmington to its original appearance. Listed on National Register of Historic Places.

Days and Hours — Farmington is located just off the intersection of Bardstown Road and the Waterson Expressway (I-264). Farmington is open every day except New Year's Day, Easter, Derby Day, Thanksgiving, Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. The hours are from 10 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday through Saturday, and Sunday from 1-30 to 4:30 p.m. The last guided tour starts at 3:45 pm. Free parking is provided. Admission charged, special senior citizens and student rates, children under six free. Attractive shop offers unusual gifts. Group tours and rates can be arranged by writing Farmington, 3033 Bardstown Road, Louisville, Ky. 40205 or by telephoning (502) 452-9920.



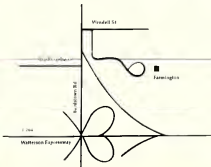
Designed according to a plan by Thomas Jefferson and constructed in 1810, Farmington is nationally recognized as an outstanding example of Federal architecture. The family sitting room (above) is graced by a Kentucky secretary/bookcase of the Sheraton period.



The Speed bedroom (left) houses the Speed children's china tea set, a child's training chair, and a Kentucky chest-of-drawers. A china doll (above) was given by Mrs. Speed to her personal maid's little girl.



Farmington features two central octagonal rooms. The dining room (above) features a Duncan Phyfe table and a Speed family silver bridle-service. The music room (left) has a London-made Nurwood-Astor piano and English harp (c. 1810).



LOCUST GROVE

Last home of General George Rogers Clark



PURE
KENTUCKY

